

# Missouri Schools for the Severely Disabled (MSSD) Educational Assessment/Study

Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary  
Education

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

September 2024

## Purpose of the Study

In November 2023, the Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) commissioned Public Consulting Group LLC (PCG) and Capital Asset Engineering (Capital AE) to conduct an independent review of the special education services, operations, and facilities within the Missouri Schools for the Severely Disabled (MSSD). This study represents the second phase of a comprehensive evaluation, building on an earlier analysis of operations and facilities presented to the Missouri State Board of Education (SBE). The primary objective of this second phase was to identify the most effective and sustainable ways to serve students with extensive support needs (ESN) within MSSD, considering current instructional practices, facility adequacy, and staffing.

MSSD was established in 1957 to provide specialized education to students with significant cognitive and physical disabilities who require intensive, individualized instruction. Over the years, educational approaches for these students have evolved significantly, and the role of MSSD remains critical in ensuring these students acquire both functional and academic skills in a safe, supportive environment. However, MSSD faces challenges such as staffing, training, technological integration, and aging facilities.

The study was designed to address key questions around the effectiveness and consistency of supports and services across MSSD sites, the structures in place to ensure proper placement and instructional services, and the potential benefits and implications of consolidating the existing 34 schools. PCG utilized a mixed-methods approach, including data and document analysis, independent IEP reviews, focus groups, surveys, and site visits, to assess these aspects thoroughly.

This study was guided by the following questions:

1. *To what extent are supports and services effective and consistently applied across MSSD sites?*
2. *What systems and structures are in place to ensure fidelity of process and implementation across DESE/MSSD?*
3. *What is the research on current trends in LRE and how can this be applied to the MSSD model? How do peer states educate students with significant cognitive or physical disabilities?*
4. *What are the educational and operational benefits and implications for the consolidation of 34 schools to: 30 schools, 25 schools, 20 schools, or regional consolidation?*

Key findings include the need for more consistent application of supports and services, better alignment of instructional practices with current trends in Least Restrictive Environment (LRE) placement, and considerations for consolidating schools to improve educational and operational efficiency. The study provides actionable recommendations aimed at enhancing the quality of education and outcomes for students with significant disabilities in Missouri.

## Historical Context and Overarching Themes

The Missouri Schools for the Severely Disabled (MSSD) have been a cornerstone of specialized education for individuals with significant disabilities since their inception in the 1950s. Initially established to provide tailored educational services, MSSD has expanded its reach across Missouri, remaining committed to its mission of supporting students with severe and profound developmental disabilities. However, MSSD now faces challenges including declining enrollment and the need to modernize its facilities, necessitating a strategic re-evaluation and reimagining of its future.

In the 2023-24 school year, MSSD leadership conducted a SWOT analysis with school leaders and teachers to identify strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats. The analysis revealed that while the staff is highly supportive and dedicated to MSSD's mission, significant challenges persist. These include high staff turnover, outdated policies and resources, inconsistent communication, and concerns

about the safety and adequacy of facilities. Opportunities for improvement were also identified, such as enhancing community engagement and updating instructional supplies and technology.

Despite these challenges, MSSD remains dedicated to enhancing the educational experience for every student. PCG and Capital AE are working with MSSD to ensure that the recommendations made will drive both instructional and operational improvements. The six key findings in this report will serve as the foundation for reimagining MSSD and guiding its future development.

The following recommendations provide a roadmap for improving the special education program and facilities. Each recommendation is interrelated and will require significant investment from MSSD. While some action steps can be implemented in the short term, full-scale implementation will take several years. The recommendations are grouped according to areas that reflect the envisioned future state of MSSD Reimagined.



## OVERARCHING THEMES AND RECOMMENDATIONS

### Clear Mission and Vision

MSSD has experienced a decrease in enrollment leading to the need to create a new mission and clear vision that includes rebranding and renaming MSSD schools.

When the State of Missouri built MSSD schools, the commitment to educating students with significant disabilities was revolutionary; yet today, many public schools serve a wide range of students with extensive support needs. This shift has resulted in a

**decrease in enrollment in MSSD schools** and the **need to create a new mission for the organization**. MSSD will need to develop a refined focus for its specialized programming and hire and train staff in support of its future vision. DESE, with input from its stakeholders, should also **rebrand MSSD** with a new name that is respectful of its students and describes its reimaged future.

## Recommendations



### Determine the type of programs offered and the profile of students served

- a. Decide Upon the Types of Specialized Programs to Offer. Establish program descriptions for the specialized programming that MSSD will offer. This may include specializing in supporting students with significant behavioral challenges or limited verbal communication.
- b. Develop Student Profiles. Create general descriptions of students who would benefit from the specialized programs that MSSD will offer to ensure the population of students served is understood by MSSD staff and LEAs, maintaining consistency with the population of students accepted and served in MSSD.
- c. Rebrand MSSD. Rename MSSD schools so the new nomenclature is respectful of its students and their potential and describes its reimagined future.



### Establish clear processes and guidance for Local Education Agencies

- a. Develop/Revise Comprehensive Admission Guidelines
  - *Standardized Admission Criteria:* Establish clear and consistent admission criteria that outline the academic, behavioral, and socio-emotional requirements for acceptance into MSSD. These criteria should be uniformly applied to all applicants to achieve fairness and transparency.
  - *Detailed Application Process:* Create a detailed application process that includes all necessary forms, documentation, and deadlines. This should be easily accessible online and provided to all LEAs.
  - *Clear Roles and Responsibilities:* Define the roles and responsibilities of both MSSD staff and the LEA representatives in the admission process, making sure that all parties are aware of their specific duties and timelines.
- b. Implement a Structured Communication Plan
  - *Designated Points of Contact:* Assign specific staff members within MSSD and each LEA to act as primary points of contact. This will help maintain consistent and direct communication channels.
  - *Regular Updates/Training:* Schedule regular updates and meetings between MSSD and LEAs to familiarize them with MSSD's admission processes, criteria, and expectations and provide regular updates to any changes that occur with these processes.
  - *Partnership Agreements:* Develop partnership agreements with each LEA that outline the mutual expectations, roles, and responsibilities in supporting students' transitions to and from MSSD.

- *Feedback Mechanisms:* Establish mechanisms for collecting feedback from LEAs regarding the admission process and communication effectiveness. This can include surveys, focus groups, or feedback forms.
- *Continuous Improvement:* Use the feedback to continuously improve and refine the admission processes and communication channels. Regular reviews should be conducted to identify areas for enhancement.

c. Create an Admissions Handbook

- *Comprehensive Handbook:* Using the existing documents already created for admissions, develop an admissions handbook that provides detailed information on MSSD's programs, admission criteria, application process, timelines, and contact information. This should be distributed to all LEAs.
- *FAQs Section:* Include a frequently asked questions (FAQs) section to address common queries from LEAs and parents. This can help reduce misunderstandings and streamline the process.

d. Establish a Digital Application and Tracking System

- *Online Application Portal:* Implement an online application portal where LEAs can submit applications, upload necessary documents, and track the status of their submissions in real time.
- *Application Tracking:* This system should allow both MSSD and LEAs to monitor the progress of applications, receive notifications of missing information, and communicate through a secure platform.

## Culture of High Expectations

MSSD staff overall have created **loving and supportive environments for students**. Sites demonstrate considerable variations in how staff approached students from a growth mindset and presumed competence perspective. While care and compassion for students are essential elements of a supportive educational environment, they **should not be confused with having high expectations for student achievement**. Care and compassion involve understanding and responding to students' needs with empathy and kindness, ensuring they feel safe and valued. Without the complement of high expectations however, these well-intentioned actions can inadvertently limit students' academic and functional skill potential.

While MSSD staff excel in creating caring and supportive environments, their varied approaches to a growth mindset must be consistently paired with high expectations to fully unlock students' academic and functional potential.

## Recommendations



### Establish high expectations for and presume competence of all students

- a. **Develop Uniform High Expectations:** Establish a policy for all MSSD schools that emphasizes high expectations for all students, regardless of the severity of their disabilities. This should be communicated clearly to all staff, students, and families and provide training for educators on the importance of maintaining high expectations, presuming competence, and strategies to support students in meeting these expectations.
- b. **Establish a Comprehensive and Balanced Culture of Academics:** Develop instructional practices that are centered around both functional academics and emergent literacy skills to promote a comprehensive and balanced education for all students that meets them at their individual level.

## Define an Instructional Framework

MSSD has traditionally concentrated on functional academics as a core component of its educational program. Functional academics, while crucial for equipping students with essential life skills, should not overshadow the importance of literacy skills in the overall education of students. A thorough examination of the current data reveals a significant gap in MSSD's curriculum: the absence of a structured and formal literacy program specifically designed for students with significant disabilities. This gap highlights the need for MSSD to integrate a robust literacy curriculum that complements its existing focus on functional academics, ensuring a well-rounded and comprehensive education for all its students. By doing so, MSSD can better support the diverse needs of its student population, fostering both functional and literacy skills that are vital for students' academic and personal growth. Research indicates that the presence of effective strategies for fostering emergent literacy skills can have a great impact, even among students with profound cognitive disabilities.<sup>1</sup>

While MSSD's focus on functional academics is essential, the lack of a structured literacy program for students with significant disabilities highlights an urgent need to integrate literacy into the curriculum to ensure a comprehensive education that fosters both functional and literacy skills.

<sup>1</sup> [CEEDAR Center: Literacy Instruction for Students with Multiple and Severe Disabilities Who Use Alternative/Augmentative Communication](#)

## Recommendations



### Select and implement high-quality curricular resources

Select High-Quality Curriculum. Adopt or develop high-quality curricular resources aligned with the DLM Essential Elements and best practices for students with ESN. These resources should support consistency and continuity across all schools. Regularly review and update curricular materials to keep them current and effective.

Professional Development. Offer professional development sessions focused on the effective use of these curricular resources so that all teachers can implement them successfully.



### Establish higher standards for IEP development and robust progress monitoring

Develop Evaluation Guidance. Develop guidance for LEAs responsible for conducting evaluations including a structured framework and protocol for evaluations so LEAs know what is expected and if a Review of Existing Data (RED) is conducted, provide parameters on what information should be included so all evaluations are comprehensive.

Develop a Standardized Process for Creating High-Quality IEPs. Develop a standardized process for creating IEPs that maintains high quality and demonstrates progression of skills over time. Conduct regular IEP audits to maintain compliance and quality. Provide feedback and support to educators to improve IEP development and identify exemplary IEPs to share with staff.

Develop Robust Progress Monitoring Systems. Implement comprehensive progress monitoring systems to track student progress accurately and consistently. Use data to inform instruction and make necessary adjustments to support student achievement. Train staff on using progress monitoring tools and interpreting data to drive instructional decisions. Create school-based teams to review data regularly.

Continuous Training. Provide continuous training on IEP development, focusing on present levels, goal development, progress monitoring, and aligning IEPs with DLM standards and student's individual needs.



### Implement best practices for students with significant behaviors

Define and Implement Best Practices. As aligned to current research, establish what best practices MSSD will implement to support students with significant behavioral challenges. Promote consistent implementation of these best practices and interventions across all schools. Continuously monitor and evaluate the effectiveness of these practices through the CSIP, and clearly outlined performance indicators making adjustments as necessary.

**Hire and Train Highly Qualified Behavioral Staff.** Train current staff or hire staff that are Registered Behavior Technicians (RBTs) so highly skilled staff are available across all schools that can support student behavior. Increase the number of full-time BCBAs in MSSD so that RBT staff can be supervised by BCBAs and provide support in real-time to staff in every school.

**Professional Learning.** Offer specialized professional learning opportunities focused on supporting non-verbal students with significant behaviors. This should include training on best practices, interventions, and strategies for effective communication. Provide access to resources and experts in the field to support ongoing professional learning.



### Expand resources for and focus on assistive technology (AT) and augmentative/alternative communication (AAC)

**Develop Comprehensive AT/AAC Support.** Develop a comprehensive support system and dedicated team to oversee AT and AAC throughout MSSD. This team should provide support and training to staff and families and work with the MO-AT. Facilitate access for all students to appropriate AT/AAC devices and conduct regular assessments to monitor their use and effectiveness as students' skills progress. Train staff on how students and teachers can use AT/AAC in a meaningful way.

**Implement Regular Assessment and Monitoring.** Implement regular assessment protocols to evaluate students' AT/AAC needs and adjust support as needed. Provide ongoing training for staff on the use of AT/AAC.



### Hire related service providers and require IEP participation

**Direct Hire Service Providers.** Prioritize hiring related service providers (e.g., speech therapists, occupational therapists) directly rather than contracting these services. This will create consistency and build upon MSSD culture. To the extent possible, develop competitive salary and benefits packages to attract and retain high-quality service providers.

**Implement a Mandatory IEP Attendance Policy.** Implement a policy requiring related service providers (e.g., speech therapists, occupational therapists, physical therapists, etc.) attend all IEP meetings. This guarantees that parents have access to the full team and can make informed decisions about their child's education.

**Coordinate Scheduling.** Develop a scheduling system that coordinates the availability of related service providers with IEP meeting times. This can involve setting aside specific days or times each month for IEP meetings to ensure provider availability.

**Offer Virtual Attendance Options.** Offer virtual attendance options for related service providers who may not be able to attend in person. This can help accommodate their schedules while ensuring their participation in IEP meetings.



### Expand post-secondary transition planning

**Implement Comprehensive Transition Planning.** Implement robust transition planning processes that prepare students for life after school. This should include collaboration with outside agencies to support

students' transition to adulthood. Develop individualized transition plans that address each student's unique needs, strengths, and goals.

Expand Collaboration with Outside Agencies. Build upon established partnerships with local agencies, vocational programs, and community organizations to support students' transition planning. Involve these agencies in the planning process from the beginning and utilize the resources through MITT that DESE already provides.

Train for Transition Planning. Provide training for staff on effective transition planning practices to enhance understanding in developing and implementing transition plans that are meaningful and effective.

## Specialized Professional Learning Plan

Our data show there is limited technical assistance from MSSD's central office for working with students who have extensive support needs,

with only 61 percent of staff survey respondents agreeing that professional development offerings help them support the teaching and learning of students in MSSD. Despite the intended role of regional professional development centers in providing this support, our data suggest that offerings are also insufficient. Creating

**specialized and targeted support for all staff will be a key strategy** that can help MSSD with retaining staff, reducing the risk of injuries, and creating a learning environment focused on academic and functional outcomes.

With limited technical assistance and insufficient professional development, MSSD must create specialized support for staff to enhance teaching for students with extensive needs, improve staff retention, reduce injury risks, and focus on academic and functional outcomes.

## Recommendations



### Leverage Regional Professional Development Centers (RPDCs)

- a. Expand Resources through Regional Professional Development Centers (RPDCs). Using the RPDCs, provide targeted, high-quality professional development that will equip educators with the skills and knowledge needed to effectively support students with ESN. This will likely require MSSD to partner with a third party or identify expert staff that can support the development of professional learning and technical assistance at the state level to support students with ESN.
- b. Develop Specialized Professional Learning Programs
  - *Targeted Training Modules:* Create specialized training modules focused on instructional practices for students with ESN. These modules should cover topics such as differentiated instruction, UDL, emergent literacy, standards-aligned instruction, behavior management, and the use of assistive technology (AT) and augmentative and alternative communication (AAC).

- *Expert-Led Workshops:* Organize workshops led by experts in the field of special education. These workshops should provide MSSD staff with the latest research-based strategies for teaching students with ESN and practical tools to enhance their instructional practices.
- c. Facilitate Collaborative Learning Communities
  - *Professional Learning Communities (PLCs):* Establish PLCs within each RPDC where MSSD staff can collaborate, share best practices, and solve common challenges. These communities should meet regularly to foster a continuous learning environment.
  - *Inter-Regional Collaboration:* Promote inter-regional collaboration by organizing joint training sessions and conferences where staff from different regions can network and learn from each other's experiences.
- d. Provide Ongoing Coaching and Mentorship
  - *Instructional Coaches:* Deploy instructional coaches through the RPDCs who specialize in supporting students with ESN. These coaches can provide one-on-one or small group coaching sessions, offering personalized support and guidance to MSSD staff.
  - *Mentorship Programs:* Implement mentorship programs that pair experienced educators with newer staff members. This peer support system can help new teachers develop their skills and confidence in working with students with significant disabilities while supporting retention of staff.
- e. Utilize Data-Driven Professional Development
  - *Needs Assessment:* Conduct regular needs assessments to identify the specific professional development needs of MSSD staff. Use this data to tailor the professional learning offerings provided by the RPDCs.
  - *Progress Monitoring for Professional Learning:* Implement a system for monitoring the impact of professional development on instructional practices and student outcomes. Use this data to refine and improve the professional learning programs offered.
- f. Enhance Access to Resources
  - *Resource Libraries:* Develop comprehensive resource libraries within each RPDC that include instructional materials, research articles, and tools specifically designed for teaching students with ESN and make these resources easily accessible to MSSD staff.
  - *Online Platforms:* Create an online platform where MSSD staff can access recorded webinars, training videos, and other professional learning materials. This platform should also facilitate online discussions and resource sharing.
- g. Foster a Culture of Continuous Improvement
  - *Regular Feedback Mechanisms:* Establish regular feedback mechanisms where MSSD staff can provide input on the professional development they receive. Use this feedback to make continuous improvements to the training programs.
  - *Recognition and Incentives:* Implement recognition and incentive programs to encourage and reward staff participation in professional development. Highlight success stories and best practices to motivate continuous improvement and staff retention.

## Optimized Operations and Facilities

While schools must place teaching and learning at the forefront, adequate infrastructure is critical too. Schools need teaching and other support positions filled with highly qualified staff who feel safe on the job and trained with the skills to perform well. Data from this report shows that MSSD has **significant work to do to be able to recruit and retain highly qualified staff and to develop financial structures nimble enough to strategically purchase equipment and resources for each school**. Further, the level of worker's compensation claims across schools requires a deeper investigation to determine how and why staff are injured at high rates and to create a plan that supports staff safety.

While teaching and learning are paramount, MSSD must address critical infrastructure issues, including recruiting and retaining qualified staff, ensuring their safety, optimizing school buildings, and eliminating underperforming leased sites to enhance efficiency and provide students with a high quality education.

Findings from this study suggest that MSSD needs to **optimize its school buildings** by redesigning and improving select sites and eliminating the use of leased buildings. While the State's Office of Administration (OA) – Facilities, Maintenance, Design, and Construction (FMDC) has invested in the right places over time for state-owned

school buildings (i.e., roof, HVAC, and structural components), many sites require more substantial cosmetic updates and redesigned spaces to better serve students. Further, **capacity of MSSD buildings overall far exceeds the enrollment, operating on average at a 50% utilization rate**. Consolidation of schools will improve efficiency and utilization of resources while enhancing the programmatic offering. Further, the leased buildings scored the lowest in nearly all areas from the facility themselves, to their maintenance, educational adequacy, and instructional practices. These buildings are generally small and do not, by virtue of their size, have enough resources or space to provide students with a high-quality education.

## Recommendations



### Improve staff retention rates

- a. Monitor Staffing Trends. Review monthly attrition rates to determine trends by position and across schools.
- b. Review Worker's Compensation Trends. Monitor these trends monthly to understand the root causes of injuries. Deliver training or purchase equipment that prevents staff injuries.
- c. Salary Ladder System. Develop a salary ladder system that encourages teachers to seek out additional certification and rewards them for experience and tenure. Explore increasing teacher salary rates so they are more in line with LEA teacher salaries.
- d. Expand Internship/Student Teaching Opportunities. To increase the pipeline of graduating teachers aware of and interested in MSSD schools, develop pathways for them to seek experience in and know about these schools.



### Develop clear budgeting and streamlined purchasing guidelines

- a. **Clarify and Document Guidelines.** Determine what schools versus Area Offices versus the Central office are responsible for funding. Streamline purchasing of equipment and standardize what materials should be available in every school. Create a replacement plan/refresh cycle for technology devices and abide by it.
- b. **Redirect Funding to Instructional Investments.** As school consolidations occur, hold MSSD funding steady for at least 5 years and redirect funding from closed buildings toward instructional investments such as improved equipment, curriculum, and extensive professional learning.



### Close schools located in leased facilities

- a. **Close Leased Facilities.** Close leased facilities, as they appear to have been designed and constructed for purposes other than schools, are generally smaller than the state owned buildings, and scored low across all educational adequacy standards.
- b. **Review Transportation Times.** Have the LRPAC review the potential transportation impacts and determine how to provide the best educational space for students currently in leased buildings.
- c. **Review Lease Agreements.** Have MSSD's legal counsel carefully review building lease terms to fully understand the implications for termination or non-renewal.



### Conduct consolidation analysis from a portfolio perspective with the LRPAC

- a. **Establish a Target Utilization Rate for Buildings.** Develop a target utilization rate of 85-90% per building to enhance MSSD's resources in specific programs while allowing flexibility for fluctuations in future enrollment.
- b. **Consolidate Schools.** Develop a plan, in coordination with the LRPAC, to further consolidate school buildings to optimize utilization of resources and improve student outcomes.
- c. **Create Plan for Vacant Buildings.** OA-FMDC should determine what should be done with vacated schools. If not repurposed, vacated schools quickly become liabilities, with vandalism, theft, and building degradation occurring due to inactivity, poor oversight, and maintenance.



### Improve educational adequacy

- a. **Focus Consolidation Efforts on Schools that Scored High in Educational Adequacy.** From a spatial-type perspective, the following spaces should be considered to offer the best schools to MSSD students and staff:
  - i. General Use Classrooms

- ii. Specialized Therapy Rooms (Occupational Therapy, Physical Therapy, and Speech Therapy)
- iii. Sensory Rooms or Calming Rooms (i.e., Respite Rooms)
- iv. Home Living Rooms
- v. Gymnasium
- vi. Cafeteria
- vii. Administration / Offices
- viii. Nursing
- ix. Kitchen
- x. Playgrounds

b. Upgrade Lighting Systems. Provide dimming capabilities and color-tuning for students who are sensitive to light.

c. Upgrade Playground Equipment and Surfaces. Establish playgrounds in all schools that are appropriate for the number of students, age ranges, accessibility needs, and disability types. Upgrade playground surfaces from rubber tiles to poured-in-place rubber. Further, upgrade playground surfaces that are grass to dedicated play areas with all-weather surfaces.

d. Upgrade Buildings to Provide Increased Privacy for and Easier Changing of Students. Create separate spaces for changing outside of the classroom and install transfer lifts in restrooms or other areas that require lifting of students.



### Improve facilities maintenance processes

- a. Improve Fire Extinguisher Inspection Procedures. Initial the inspection tags on the fire extinguishers during the monthly inspection to provide accountability for the inspector and confidence in the staff that the equipment is in compliance and ready if an emergency occurs.
- b. Install and Maintain Parking Lot and Entryway Signage. Improve signage to direct visitors to sign in upon entry to increase accountability for visitors and reduce risk of intruders utilizing a side or back door to gain building entry.
- c. Enact Training and Protocols for Vinyl Flooring. Enact strip and waxing training and protocols for vinyl flooring in schools. Develop a policy and provide adequate training for custodial staff to properly strip and wax the floors so that they are cleaner and provide a more welcoming environment for students and staff.
- d. Develop Mechanical and Electrical Room Policies. Create policies that prohibit mechanical and electrical rooms from being used for storage. Storing boxes and other equipment in front of electrical panels is against building code and storing combustible materials, such as boxes, poses a fire hazard for the building.



### Improve safety and security measures

- a. Install Fencing. Install fencing around entire buildings, particularly at schools with classrooms with exterior doors, to reduce the risk of student injuries from automobile traffic or other outside dangers.

- b. Upgrade Lighting in Parking Lots and Around Buildings. Upgrade lighting to provide a safer and more secure environment for staff and other guests to reach their vehicles, particularly during dark winter months, without being endangered.
- c. Install Security Alarm Systems in All Schools. Install security alarm systems in schools that lack them to reduce potential for theft and vandalism after hours and on the weekends and to provide an additional layer of protection.
- d. Renovate School Entryways for External Direct Line of Sight. Renovate schools so that the front office of each school has a direct line of site from the administration areas to the parking lots, thereby reducing reliance on video doorbells and allowing for increased notification times to personnel in the event of an emergency.
- e. Install Exterior Door Card Readers. Eliminate the use of keys and install card access readers on all exterior doors being used for entry/exit for increased safety, staff accountability (i.e., electronic logs showing when staff come and go; building access termination when staff depart), and easier access to playgrounds or yards during recess, emergencies, or drills.
- f. Lock Doors to High-Risk Areas. Lock doors to all areas that are considered high-risk, such as kitchens, mechanical rooms, electrical rooms, and custodial closets. Install locking mechanisms that are inaccessible without a key so that doors cannot be permanently unlocked. Alternatively, installing handles that are always locked will ensure these doors cannot be opened without the proper key.
- g. Install/Upgrade Public Address Systems. Install or upgrade public address or communication systems to ensure adequate communication is available to all classrooms. Improving communication systems will enable the teachers to speak with office staff without having to leave the room and to have immediate and reliable access to the office during emergencies.
- h. Install Security Vestibules. Construct security vestibules in schools that were not constructed with them as an extra layer of protection from intruders quickly entering the building.
- i. Develop Storage Equipment Policy and Clear Routes. Develop a policy for the storage of equipment in egress routes (i.e., hallways). Dispose of excess equipment in hallways to follow fire codes and to reduce the time required for students and staff to evacuate buildings.
- j. Extend Sidewalks to Evacuation Points. Extend concrete pads with sidewalks to ensure a hard surface is provided from emergency evacuation points, thereby eliminating the opportunity for students in wheelchairs to get stuck in the grass or mud.

## Improved Communication and Stakeholder Engagement

Though schools are overseen by Area Offices, in many cases, they operate independently. The rural location of many schools and the **part-time leadership structure** of Building Administrators splitting their time between two or more sites **contribute to the inconsistencies seen among schools**. Striking a balance between school level decision making and the cohesiveness and standardization required to

To ensure high quality service delivery across all schools, MSSD must balance school level autonomy with cohesive standards, while increasing parental involvement through tailored training to foster partnerships and empower parents as their children transition out of school.

ensure high quality service delivery in all schools will require finesse and a nuanced approach.

**Increasing the involvement of parents through trainings** tailored to them is one way to have them feel like partners in their child's education. Given the nature of their

children's disabilities, MSSD can play an important role in having parents learn from teachers and others about strategies they could employ, especially as their children age out of school.

## Recommendations



### Develop clear communication channels and roles and responsibilities

- a. Establish Robust Communication Channels using a Multi-Tier Communication Strategy
  - *Vertical Communication:* Develop consistent vertical communication structures from DESE leadership to MSSD Area Offices and down to the building level. This includes clear directives, updates, and feedback mechanisms to develop consistent communication channels.
  - *Horizontal Communication:* Develop horizontal communication structures between schools within MSSD to share best practices, resources, and collaborative opportunities that allow schools to collaborate in a meaningful and consistent way.
  - *Designated Points of Contact:* Identify and appoint specific individuals at each level (DESE, MSSD leadership, Area Directors, Assistant Area Directors, Building Administrators) responsible for communication. These points of contact should deliver messages accurately and promptly across the organization.
- b. Establish Regular Meetings and Updates
  - *MSSD Leadership Meetings:* Schedule regular meetings between DESE and LEAs to discuss policies, updates, and initiatives for LEAs that have students attending MSSD.
  - *School-Level Meetings:* Hold quarterly meetings led by Area Directors for Building Administrators to align practices and address any concerns or questions. These meetings should include agendas and meeting minutes to support consistency and cover key items
  - *Digital Communication Platforms:* Utilize digital platforms (e.g., intranet, email newsletters, video conferencing) to disseminate information efficiently. Make these platforms accessible to all staff members and provide training on their use if necessary.
  - *Feedback Mechanisms:* Implement feedback mechanisms (e.g., surveys, forms) to gather input from staff at all levels. This will help identify communication gaps and areas for improvement at regular intervals.
- c. Review and Clarify Roles and Responsibilities Across MSSD
  - *Comprehensive Role Review:* Conduct a thorough review of all staff roles and responsibilities across the organization to identify any gaps, overlaps, or redundancies. This can be done through job description audits and interviews with staff members. Using this data, determine if there are any shifts or gaps within the current organizational structure that should be addressed.

- *Role Alignment Workshops:* Organize workshops or focus groups with staff from different levels to discuss and clarify roles and responsibilities. This will help everyone understand their own duties as well as those of their colleagues.
- *Updated Job Descriptions:* Update job descriptions to accurately reflect any revised expectations and responsibilities. Make these descriptions easily accessible to all staff members. Where redundancies or gaps are identified, redefine roles and redistribute responsibilities to optimize efficiency and effectiveness. Communicate these changes clearly to all affected staff members.
- *Feedback and Adjustment:* Create a continuous feedback loop where staff can provide input on role clarity. Use this feedback to make necessary adjustments and improvements.

d. Emphasize Instructional Leadership

- *Focus on Instructional Leadership:* Prioritize instructional leadership by ensuring that Building Administrators focus on teaching and learning. Provide professional development opportunities specifically geared towards enhancing instructional leadership skills.
- *Dedicated Building Administrators:* Commit a full-time Building Administrator to each site.
- *Instructional Leadership Teams:* Establish instructional leadership teams at each school comprised of Building Administrators, lead teachers, and related service providers. These teams should focus on curriculum implementation, teaching strategies, and student achievement.
- *Professional Development:* Offer targeted professional development programs for instructional leaders to stay updated on best practices, new educational research, and innovative teaching methodologies.
- *Performance Metrics:* Develop clear performance metrics for Building Administrators and educators to evaluate their effectiveness in promoting high-quality instruction and improving student outcomes.



**Increase access to IEP documents and conduct parent trainings**

a. Improve Assistive Technology (AT)/Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC) Training for Parents

- *Regular Training Workshops:* Organize regular workshops for parents on the use of AT and AAC. These workshops should cover basic operations, troubleshooting, and strategies for integrating AT/AAC into daily activities.
- *Online Resources:* Develop an online repository of AT/AAC training materials, including instructional videos, user guides, and FAQs so these resources are easily accessible to all parents.

b. Translate IEP Documents

- *Standardized Translation Processes:* Establish a standardized process for translating IEP documents into the primary languages spoken by families.

- *Access and Distribution:* Provide translated IEP documents to parents in a timely manner. Implement a system for tracking the distribution of translated documents so all families receive them.
- c. Conduct Additional Parent Training for Transition Planning
  - *Transition Planning Workshops:* Conduct workshops for parents focused on transition planning. These workshops should cover key topics such as navigating adult services, understanding legal rights, and advocating for their child's needs post-graduation.
  - *Resource Guides:* Develop comprehensive resource guides for parents that outline the transition planning process, available services, and contact information for relevant agencies. These guides should be updated regularly to ensure they provide current information.
  - *One-on-One Support:* Offer one-on-one support for parents to help them understand and navigate the transition planning process. This can include meetings with transition specialists or Home/School Coordinators who can provide personalized guidance and assistance.
- d. Increase School-Community and School-LEA Partnerships
  - *Partnership Development Guidelines:* Create guidelines and expectations for schools on developing partnerships with community organizations and LEAs. These guidelines should include steps for identifying potential partners, establishing collaboration goals, and maintaining effective communication to ensure students attending MSSD have opportunities to participate with nondisabled peers and the community.
  - *Community Outreach Events:* Organize regular community outreach events to build relationships between schools, families, and local organizations. These events can include resource fairs, community service projects, and informational sessions.
  - *Shared Resources and Programs:* Encourage schools to share resources and programs with community partners that have been successful. This can include joint training sessions and collaborative projects that benefit students and the community in MSSD.

## Peer State Research

The 2004 reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) introduced provisions allowing states to allocate up to 10% of their annual IDEA-B funds for state-level activities, including creating high-cost fund structures to support Local Education Agencies (LEAs). These funds are critical in offsetting the substantial costs associated with educating students with exceptional support needs (ESN), where the cost of special education and related services exceeds the state's average per-pupil expenditure. As part of this review, PCG conducted an analysis of peer state research to inform the future vision and instructional model for MSSD. The following are our findings.

### High-Cost Funds Overview

- **Oklahoma's High Needs Risk Pool** - Oklahoma uses IDEA-B funds to operate a High Needs Risk Pool, categorized into two tiers. Tier I supports out-of-state residential placements as determined by the student's Individualized Education Program (IEP) team, while Tier II supports high-need students within the LEA, provided that the associated costs are at least three times the state's average per-pupil expenditure. Eligible expenses include one-to-one assistance, specialized equipment, and services outlined in the student's IEP. Non-allowable costs include legal fees and administrative expenses.

- **Louisiana's High-Cost Services (HCS) Fund** - Louisiana allocates \$16.4 million annually in IDEA-B funds to support students with complex needs. LEAs may apply for funds when the cost of educating a student exceeds three times the state's average per-pupil expenditure. Funds are allocated through a combination of IDEA funds and the state's Minimum Foundation Program (MFP) and are strictly used to provide services detailed in a student's IEP. The state also provides a guide to high-quality contract service providers to support LEAs in meeting the needs of high-need students.

### **Cooperative Models in Special Education**

- **Michigan's Intermediate School Districts (ISDs)** - Michigan operates 56 Intermediate School Districts (ISDs), which serve as cooperatives for both traditional school districts and charter schools. ISDs provide specialized programming for students with ESN, such as those with autism and severe intellectual disabilities. Funded through local taxes, state and federal funds, and grants, ISDs enable member districts to share resources and offer specialized services that individual districts might struggle to provide independently.
- **Maine's Southern Penobscot Regional Program for Children with Exceptionalities (SPRPCE)** - The SPRPCE in Maine is a cooperative model serving 23 school districts, focusing on cost-effective and collaborative resource sharing to provide special education services. The SPRPCE operates two specialized programs for students with disabilities, including a therapeutic day program and a program for students with multiple disabilities. Funding is provided through a cost-sharing model among member districts.

### **Colorado's Boards of Cooperative Education Services (BOCES)**

Colorado's BOCES, established by state law, are cooperative entities that allow districts to pool resources for providing special education services. BOCES operate under a cost-sharing arrangement and can receive state and federal funds to support special education programming. The BOCES model enables member districts to access a broader range of services and avoid duplication of efforts.

### **State Support and Technical Assistance**

Several states, including Arkansas and Tennessee, provide technical assistance and resources to LEAs to ensure compliance with state and federal mandates while supporting the needs of students with ESN. Arkansas, for instance, offers detailed resources aligned with the state's alternative academic achievement standards, while Tennessee emphasizes Universal Design for Learning (UDL) and inclusive environments through its Statewide Technical Assistance Network (TN-TAN).

### **Considerations for Missouri DESE**

The highlighted approaches offer relevant insights for DESE as it seeks to improve MSSD and address the needs of students in rural communities. Key considerations include:



**Defining MSSD's Mission:** As enrollment patterns change, it is essential to clearly define the population MSSD serves and ensure that facilities are adequate for their needs.



**Encouraging Cooperative Models:** Missouri could benefit from incentivizing LEAs to join or establish cooperative service models, especially in rural areas.



**Providing State-Supported Technical Assistance:** DESE should consider developing targeted technical assistance to build the capacity of school districts in serving students with complex needs, which could include programmatic standards and operational practices.

These strategies could serve as a roadmap for DESE to enhance service delivery for students with ESN, ensuring that all students receive a Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) in the Least Restrictive Environment (LRE).

## Long-Range Planning Advisory Committee

The Long-Range Plan (LRP) for MSSD will set the future direction for the district's facilities and geographic presence, considering critical factors like operations, education, finances, and facility conditions. To guide this process, a Long-Range Planning Advisory Committee (LRPAC) will be formed, including a diverse group of stakeholders from across MSSD's ecosystem. This inclusive approach ensures that all voices are heard, particularly in discussions around potential consolidation or closures, fostering a sense of ownership in the final decisions.

PCG and Capital AE will work closely with MSSD leadership to finalize the committee's composition, aiming for 30-50 members who will represent the various impacted groups. Through a series of virtual and in-person meetings, the LRPAC will be trained to interpret key data and use it to make informed decisions about MSSD's future. The meetings, beginning in the 2024-25 school year, will cover topics ranging from academics and facility conditions to funding sources and consolidation strategies, ultimately leading to a well-rounded and strategic plan for the district's future.



**Solutions that Matter**